

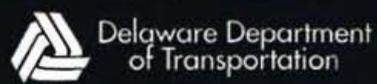
# Laurel Railway Station Renovations

Transportation Enhancement Project

Little Creek Hundred,  
Sussex County, Delaware

February 2004

Prepared for:



Delaware Department  
of Transportation

Prepared by:



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**Historic Background of Laurel Depot**

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## Historic Background of the Laurel, Delaware Depot

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, railroads helped to transform the nature of the built environment of Sussex County, Delaware. Depots were constructed, right of ways graded, rails laid, bridges built, and towers erected as the railroad helped to change time and travel throughout the county and state. This history focuses as specifically as possible on the growth and development of the railroad in Laurel, Delaware.

### *Background Delaware Railroad History*

Before the 1850s, virtually all travel in Sussex County was done either by water or inland dirt roads. While railroads had been constructed through northern New Castle County in the 1830s, development of rail lines languished in southern Delaware until the mid-nineteenth century. In 1852, with yet another railroad charter company “floundering,” the state of Delaware and du Pont family stepped in to prevent another collapse (Lichtenstein, p. 37-38). The Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore (PW&B) Railroad “formally leased the road in 1855 and, from 1857 on, operated the line as its Delaware Division” (Lichtenstein, p. 38). Choosing an inland route along the western border of Delaware, “bypassing established towns in favor of easier engineering and potential business from Maryland’s eastern shore,” the new railroad pushed south from Wilmington, through Dover in January 1856, and finally terminated in Delmar in 1859 (Lichtenstein, p. 38-39). This southern extension of the existing rail line from Wilmington was known as the “Delaware Railroad” and passed directly through the town of Laurel (Munroe, p. 160).

With the new railroad complete, the focus of trade shifted inland for Sussex County farmers. Suddenly, southern Delaware was tied to northern Delaware “through a common technology,” and farmers began experimenting with “perishable products that could now move more rapidly to market via the railroad” (Lichtenstein, p. 39). Peaches, melons and other produce came to dominate the agricultural production of Sussex County farmers. The expansion of truck farming throughout the area led to a growth of canneries in many towns such as Laurel (Lichtenstein, p. 44). Ultimately, the profitability and expansion of branch lines from the Delaware Railroad’s main line made it “the largest landowner and taxpayer in the state and a key player in statewide politics” (Lichtenstein, p. 43).

In 1901, the Pennsylvania Railroad (now the owner of the old Philadelphia, Baltimore & Wilmington Railroad company) reorganized its Delaware holdings into a new company known as the Philadelphia, Baltimore & Washington Railroad (Lichtenstein, p. 44). During the early twentieth century, the Pennsylvania Railroad embarked on a large-scale electrification project to help make its line more competitive. By 1928, the portion of the rail line stretching from Philadelphia to Wilmington was electrified at great cost to the Pennsylvania Railroad (Lichtenstein, p. 45). The downstate portion of the line – the Delaware Railroad – was never electrified.

Railroads began to face competition following the increase of automobile ownership and the advent of the trucking industry during the early twentieth century. Following the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1916, road building throughout the county and state began to increase, making it safer, faster and easier to transport

perishables by truck rather than rail (Lichtenstein, p. 48). World War I further “exacerbated the railroad’s woes” as frustrated shippers turned to alternate means of transportation (Lichtenstein, p. 48). Despite ruthless reorganization, “Delaware’s improved roadways undercut railroad passenger usage” and trucking offered advantageous “door-to-door service” over the aging southern rail lines (Lichtenstein, p. 48). When the railroads attempted to establish their own trucking subsidiaries, they were “found to violate anti-trust laws” (Lichtenstein, p. 49).

The Pennsylvania Railroad eliminated downstate passenger services on the Delaware Railroad line by 1965, and its freight business began to wane steadily thereafter (Lichtenstein, p. 49). Since the Delmarva peninsula “had relatively few heavy industries, and perishable agricultural commodities that formed the backbone of the downstate business were most vulnerable to truck competition” the Pennsylvania Railroad began to downgrade many of its southern lines (Lichtenstein, p. 49). One of the two tracks were removed from the entire length of the Delaware Railroad line in 1956 (Lichtenstein, p. 49). Today, the old Delaware Railroad line is a single track, and is owned and maintained by Conrail (Lichtenstein, p. 34).

### *Laurel Depot*

According to the 1868 Beer’s Atlas of the State of Delaware, a single story brick depot once stood on the east side of the railroad tracks, just south of the intersection of Corn (now Poplar) and Depot (now Clayton) Streets (Figure 1; Hancock, p. 90). This old depot (Plate 1) was located across the street from the Laurel waterworks building on Poplar Street (Hancock, p. 90). This old depot was likely constructed shortly after the arrival of the Delaware Railroad through the town of Laurel, c. 1859.<sup>1</sup> The old passenger depot first appears on Sanborn Fire Insurance mapping starting in June 1891 (See Figure 2). Sanborn Fire Insurance mapping suggests that this old depot was razed between 1908 and 1912 to make way for a new passenger depot located several blocks to the north (See Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6). An old freight depot was also located south of the old passenger depot, just south of 8<sup>th</sup> Street. On the June 1907 Sanborn map, an open cattle pen is seen south of the freight depot, along with another outbuilding; these outbuildings were razed by October 1922. This old freight depot was razed between July 1931 and September 1945, giving way to a new freight platform for the Farmer’s Exchange, located on Railroad Avenue, just north of W. 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

The present day Laurel depot is located along the east side of the Delaware (Conrail) Railroad tracks, north of Ward (Mechanic) Street. Sanborn Fire Insurance mapping and physical evidence suggest that this current Colonial Revival passenger depot was constructed between 1908 and 1912 (Plate 2).<sup>2</sup> A wood frame “waiting room” for passengers was also constructed on the west side of the tracks between 1912 and 1922 (See Figures 6 and 7 and Plate 3). This waiting room is seen on Sanborn mapping as late as 1945; today (October 2003) it is demolished (See Figure 9). The Laurel depot is a

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<sup>1</sup> Kendal Jones, a Laurel native for over seventy years and member of the Laurel Historical Society, corroborated in an oral interview on 02/02/2004 that the first brick depot constructed in Laurel was built c. 1859.

<sup>2</sup> Kendal Jones further corroborated in an oral interview on 02/02/2004 that the present depot in Laurel was built “between 1907 and 1908”.

contributing feature to the Laurel Historic District, and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on July 27, 1988.

The Laurel railroad depot is located on a 1.38-acre tract of land (tax parcel 4-32-8.06-116) and is currently owned by the Mayor and Council of Laurel according to tax records. It is a one story, eight bay, Colonial Revival brick building with a slate, gable-on-hip roof, brick foundation and partial basement over the ticketing and toilet areas. The exterior of the depot is red brick, laid in a Flemish bond pattern, with a sandstone belt course, water table, tooled keystones and quoins. A corbeled brick interior chimney is seen from the front (east) façade. Glazed brick pavers and a track platform with decorative braces and simple rectangular wood posts are seen on the east side of the tracks only; historic photographs from the early twentieth century indicate passenger platforms on both sides of the tracks (See Plate 3). Historic photographs show that a landscaped park was located east of the depot prior to the construction of the Laurel municipal building to the east on Poplar Street in 1937 (See Plate 4).

The front (east) façade of the current depot features three single paneled pedestrian entries and single and paired windows. Starting from the south, the first and third bays feature a single twelve-over-one double-hung wood sash window with a sandstone keystone. The second bay contains an eight panel wood door with a marble sill and four-light wood transom. The fourth bay features a paired twelve-over-one, double hung, wood sash window with a sandstone keystone lintel. The fifth, sixth, and seventh bays repeat the same pattern as the first three bays, while the eighth bay features an eight-panel wood entry with a sandstone keystone above the door.

The side (south) façade features a large four bay window, with four single twelve-over-one double hung wood sash windows. The gable peak is vented on both the south and north sides. The north side façade recedes from the building core, and features two single twelve-over-one double hung wood sash windows with sandstone keystone lintels.

The rear (west) façade features balanced fenestration, similar to that of the front (east) façade. Unlike the front façade, however, the rear façade has a small, one by one bay rectangular projecting bay facing the paved passenger platform. Wood freight doors are thought to have existed on the northernmost end of the façade. To date, no written or photographic records support or refute this assertion, but the northernmost bay appears to be filled in with a different color of red brick, suggesting the presence of these doors.<sup>3</sup>

The passenger platform, located along the eastern side of the railroad tracts, features brick pavers, and a wide, overhanging eave for shelter. Simple, rectangular wood posts with decorative wood corner bracing are seen supporting the overhang. Aluminum soffit now covers most of the exposed rafters along the passenger platform and the surrounding overhang around the entire depot. Historic photographs and an oral interviews with Kendal Jones on February 2 and 10, 2004 suggest that a longer passenger overhang was once located south of the current depot (See Plates 3 and 4).<sup>4</sup>

According to a written description of the depot by Harold Hancock, there was once “wainscoting, bent-wood benches, the floors and doors are original, as are the brass

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<sup>3</sup> In oral interviews on 02/02/2004 and 02/10/2004, Kendal Jones stated that he remembered wood panel freight doors on the east and west sides of the depot. These doors facilitated the movement of railroad freight off the tracks, into the depot, and then into vehicles for transport.

<sup>4</sup> Kendal Jones surmised that this portion of the passenger platform overhang was removed once the town of Laurel took over ownership of the depot during the 1970s (02/02/2004).

gas light ceiling fixtures, which have been cleaned and electrified” inside the station (Hancock, p. 90). Based on a field view in October 2003, most of these interior details are now gone, having been removed or damaged. Kendal Jones suggested on February 10, 2004 that portions of the interior of the station were torn out intentionally to allow for future renovations and/or rehabilitation of the building. Oral interviews following the October 2003 site visit and the 1988 National Register Form for the Laurel Historic District (S-7656) state that the Laurel depot once functioned as the “town offices” for Laurel (Section 7, Page 1, Laurel Historic District National Register Form). Today, the depot is unoccupied and awaiting interior and exterior restorations.

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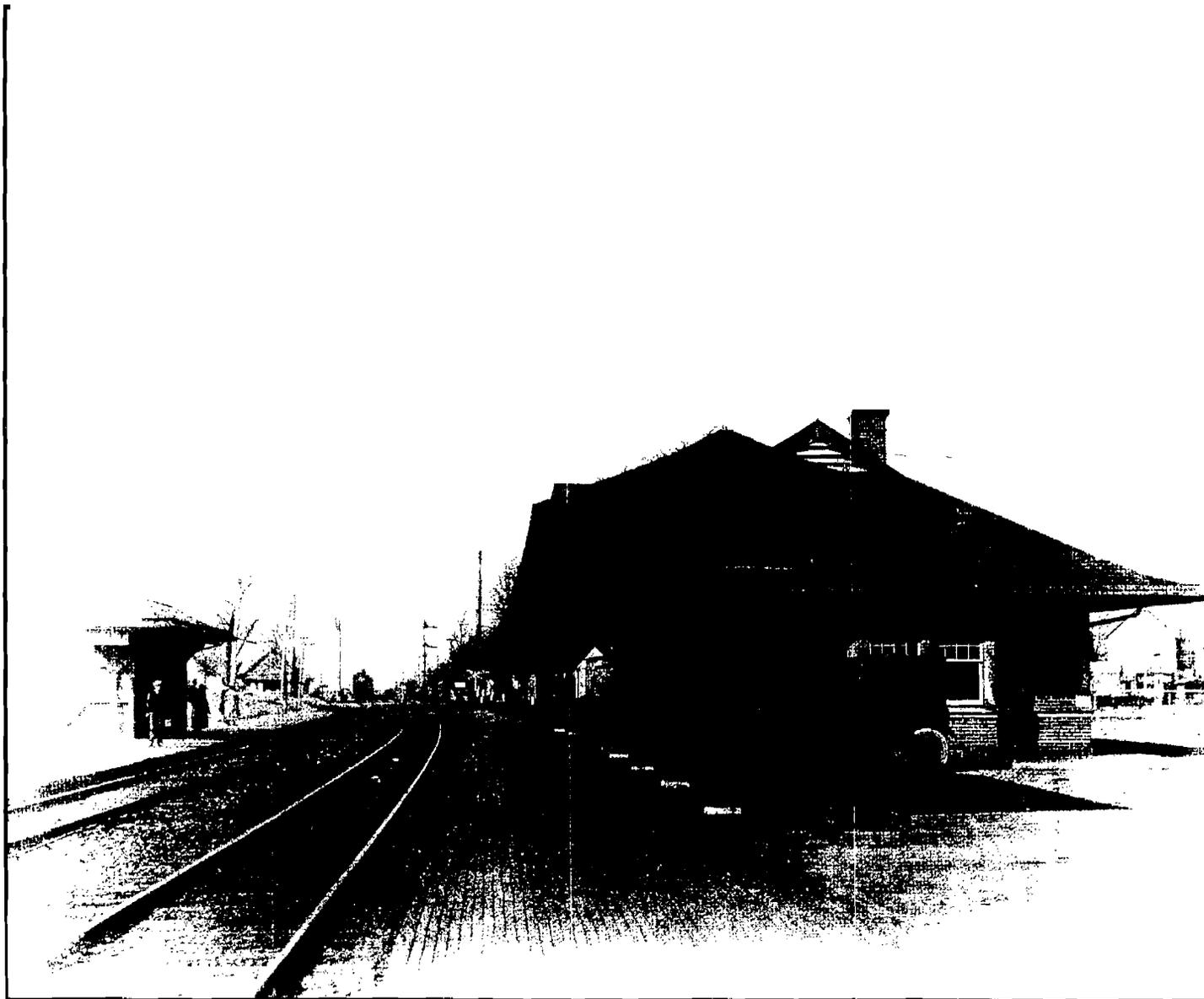
Delaware State Archives  
Free Library of Philadelphia  
Historical Society of Pennsylvania  
Laurel Public Library



Delaware State Archives  
General Photo Collection  
Former Laurel Train Station  
(demolished between 1908-1912)  
c. 1900  
Box #3, Folder #7



Delaware State Archives  
General Photo Collection  
Laurel Train Station  
c. 1912  
Box #3, Folder #7



Delaware State Archives  
Photo from DeIDOT  
2002 Calendar  
Laurel Train Station  
c. 1917



Laurel Train Depot  
c. 1915

Photo Courtesy of  
Kendal Jones  
(Print from Waller Collection)

\* Note: This photo was taken c. 1915 of the Laurel Train Depot, looking northwest. There was a park with a semi-circular drive from Poplar Street (now the location of the municipal building). The tall smokestack in the center (which Waller tried to white-out) was from the Marvil Package Company, located behind West and Townsend Streets.